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QUESTION OF THE REALIZATION OF THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT

Written statement submitted by the International Federation of Rural Adult Catholic Movements, a non-governmental organization on the Roster

The Secretary General has received the following communication, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[14 December 1992]

1. A meeting of the Executive Committee of the International Federation of Rural Adult Catholic Movements (FIMARC) was held from 10 to 25 October 1992 at Thiès in Senegal to discuss the topic "Human rights and development in the rural environment", from the specific standpoint of self-sufficiency in food.

An alarming situation

2. It has to be recognized that there are many serious violations of the right to live, and frequently even of the right to survive, in the rural environment. Development there is at a standstill. Self-sufficiency in food is no longer guaranteed by Governments, for which that is the first duty. It is obvious to us that Governments have in general abandoned their commitments on account of structural readjustment policies. The result has been that agrarian reform has been delayed, assistance or projects have been rejected, works have been abandoned halfway ... In some countries, the peasants feel pushed aside by their own people, whom they ought to be able to feed, they feel abandoned, doomed to drift away from the land and swell the ranks of the rejected and starving.

3. Villages almost everywhere manage to survive today because of the women, children and old people and the courageous initiatives that they take. But how long can this state of affairs last? A recent survey by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) bears this out. According to IFAD rural poverty is increasing sharply virtually all over the world; of the 4 billion people counted in 114 developing countries, over 2 billion live in rural areas and of these, 1 billion are economically below the poverty line; this represents an increase of 40 per cent compared with 20 years ago.

4. If we look for the causes of the impoverishment of rural areas and of the degradation of their economic, social and cultural fabric we find, in some cases, the exceptional drought of the past 10 years and, in others, excessive rainfall, resulting in uncontrollable floods. But we do not forget the madness of a kind of agriculture concerned above all with productivity, which has exhausted the best farmlands and denuded vast areas of forest that in the past regulated the rainy seasons.

5. In India and the Philippines, in addition to natural disasters, the rural population also has to confront the hazard of industrial pollution. The building of nuclear power stations in volcanic areas like Pinatubo, which are prone to frequent earthquakes, disturbs a large number of people, whose anguished appeals are suppressed by their Governments, in collusion with foreign companies, which have little concern for the health of the people. Unfortunately, these situations exist in too many countries.

6. Furthermore, the rural population are indignant at some of the measures taken by the authorities, which limit their capacity to meet their essential needs "in order to protect nature". According to a report prepared for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro (A/CONF.151 PC/15), an environmental policy that focuses mainly on the conservation and protection of resources without regard for the livelihoods of those who depend on those resources for a living will impact adversely on poverty. Obviously, it is no longer possible to separate development and the environment: they go hand in hand. Rural people are aware that they are the ones who have primary responsibility for the environment and are best placed to maintain its balance. This was the thinking that lay behind the written declaration that FIMARC addressed to the United Nations at the Rio Conference in June 1992.

Facing the challenges

7. Rural populations are accordingly demanding the right to organize themselves into autonomous associations, cooperatives or trade unions, whose goals are decided by them, on the basis of their real needs and of the type of agriculture they want. That is the way they can promote real democracy, a democracy that should not be confused with a divisive multi-party system, easily taken over by the Government in power. We believe that a democracy which is established and lived at the grass-roots level, in rural communities responsible for their own future, will be the surest guarantee of lasting but above all mutually supportive development.

8. Unfortunately, a process of this kind combining development and democracy, will remain only a dream as long as:

(a) Peoples are subjected to the implacable laws of the market place and of an economy whose principal aim is maximum profit, regardless of whether essential subsistence needs are met.

(b) The IMF and the World Bank continue to impose such restrictions that in the words of Mr. Danilo Türk, Special Rapporteur of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, they inevitably affect the realization of economic, social and cultural rights;

(c) Governments fail to take any measures to halt the drift away from the countryside and control migration, so that the economic and social fabric of the villages can be restored and their self-sufficiency in food can be guaranteed, which is the first prerequisite for all human development and the prime obligation of every State; and

(d) Those who wield political or economic power use fundamentalist religion as an excuse to impose practices that violate the right to evolutionary democratic development.

Our belief

9. In the face of and even because of all these challenges, the members of the International Federation of Rural Adult Catholic Movements, working with communities of different religions, have committed themselves first and foremost to the cause of the most deprived, of those who have no rights, because it is with these people that our action takes on its full meaning, based as it is on our firm belief that man was created in the image of God, God the creator, God the liberator, and that man can only express his human dignity in a worthy fashion through a life in which he achieves liberation in partnership with others.